

# Disaggregated agency

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I haven't read Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (1991) and therefore will not comment on the way Robert Nozick first, then Doug Robinson, draw their notions of «disaggregated self» and «disaggregated agency» from that book. What seems clear however is that the potential connections implied between hermeneutics, social science (of which I take translation studies to be a component), cognitive research and beyond that perhaps, neurological studies, suggest the need for a repartitioning of the disciplines. I mention this in passing, only to hint that the form taken by the present debate —much to the credit of Doug Robinson— makes it worthy of interest far beyond the confines of translation scholarship. I could not help noticing also how the exchanges cross over with a number of ongoing debates, for example around the theme of cultural «identity».

The notion of disaggregated agency, whether applied to a «single human being», an «ephemeral conglomeration» of agents, or even a «nation», is indeed a productive metaphor. Its scope reaches far beyond the task of the translator, to encompass the destiny of all social agents. Although Doug Robinson assigns the genealogy of the expression to a need to «deal with the new complexities» he saw after writing his professional «declaration of independence», it can just as well be

read as a generalized reaction against the (to some, debilitating) ideas of social disaggregation, fragmentation, chaos deprived of agency. A sign of the times perhaps, as much as a personal stance.

Ideas float at certain times to be seized upon by different people, unaware that others are working along the same lines. We have all had this strange feeling of being part of an invisible cohort (again the spirit-channeling metaphor may be useful here, if we are not afraid of admitting that theoretical constructs themselves, including the most rational-looking, are just that: constructs elaborated by the scholar's imagination on the basis of other imaginative constructs). It so happens that my personal history and positionings have made me particularly responsive over the years to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. «Disaggregated agency» could not fail to remind me of the concept of *habitus*, a stenograph for a reality that is both structured (being the result of multiple determinations) and structuring (i.e. agentive). [Should anyone be unfamiliar with Bourdieu's work on this and related matters, see e.g. *The Logic of Practice*, in particular Part 1, tr. by Richard Nice. 1990, Stanford: Stanford U. P. The publisher for Europe is Polity Press, Cambridge. The original in French — *Le sens pratique*. 1981. Paris: Editions de Minuit— is not bad either...]. I believe Bourdieu

also refers somewhere to the notion of «habitus clivé» (split habitus). Habituses are incorporated, «embodied» to the point of being instantly recognizable in the course of social relations. The notion as such is hardly new (Aristotle, St.-Augustine, Elias and Panovsky among other old-hat? figures have used it productively) but it was promoted to pivotal theoretical status as part of a rich network of concepts by Bourdieu. Like Robinson's disaggregated agency, the habitus applies differentially to the individual agent and his/her life story, *Lebenslauf*, etc., to groups of interest, and most notably to nation-states (or «state-societies» in Elias's wording). Habituses are highly specific. The concept translates nicely in the different ways in which language is used, in daily life as in more restricted fields.

I am currently working on the very same notion of habitus as it applies to the translator (conceived as a «single human being»). Just as Doug Robinson refers to disaggregated agency, I came out recently with the notion of a «mosaic habitus». I found the term useful to express: (1) the particular brand of habitus required of the human being a.k.a. translator. All social agents have more or less «mosaic» habituses but the translator must cultivate this pluri-identity and modulated submissiveness, or at least make do with it willingly. This feature may provide a bridge for Anthony Pym's notion of an intercultural space or «interculture» defining the peculiar position of the translator, although it is still not clear to me how an intercultural could stand off in a balanced way between regular cultures. The prefix does not quite evoke the astounding complexity of the domain; (2) the tension felt while translating (not only intellectual but physical); (3) the faculty of adaptation which is a distinguishing trait of the profession.

In this no doubt biased and partial and summary reading, the two cons-

tructs —disaggregated agency and mosaic habitus— strike me as fairly compatible. Perhaps the former is less affirmative than the latter, due to the deprivative morpheme *dis-*. But again, what matters is the way they can (and ought to) be made to function in case studies, to enlighten descriptions of intercultural transfer from the point of view of the agent.

A quick footnote to explain why I think it is important to rehabilitate the status of the translator in translation studies and why I view Doug's and others' efforts as positive for the discipline as a whole. In the field as I see it sedimenting these days, I can identify three main branches which I label, for convenience, «hermeneutic», «culturalist», and «empirical-mentalist». If the distinction makes sense, then it is plausible that one common pole around which productive exchanges may develop and the (inter?)discipline preserve some coherence, is precisely, the persona of the translator. This does not mean that other approaches focussing on, e.g., the larger structures bearing on the task, processes, products of translation, etc., are mistaken or should not be pursued. In fact, I take Gideon Toury's recent DTS and beyond to be the most formidable effort to date, and a highly successful one at that, to deal with the notion of intercultural translation systemically. I see also his model as flexible enough to allow for a reprioritizing of the translator's disaggregating agency (or mosaic habitus, whatever we choose to call this passive-agentive complex), by mere topological 'translation' of its structure.

While recognizing indeed the risk that an objectivist angle entails, to fragment the field into reductive specialities and therefore, to fall short of providing the conditions for a truly integrative theory of translation (such an angle would exclude, presumably, the hermeneutic branch as merely «speculative»), I am also wary of discarding all structural-systemic

attempts as distant echoes of the 60s and 70s, as might be (wrongly?) deduced from Michael Cronin's Response. As a matter of fact, and even though this may have no other value than a personal anecdote, I can vouch that reading closely Bourdieu's systemic case studies helped me better understand where my location was and why, in the particular context of the French society where I come from. I

see the effect on me to have been that of a true «socioanalysis». Far from being disempowering, the model —because it was flexible and refined enough to precipitate the variety of forces moulding society, through a process of internalization, into the single concept of habitus— helped me gain confidence in proposing my own imaginary take on issues I view as important.